

[which he saw as a prelude to getting out] and about the pay-off to stopping the bombing.”¹³⁸

Johnson knew that it wasn't enough to fight back; there also had to be a convincing argument made by persuasive people. Finding Vietnam advocates was no problem. Johnson himself made the case to journalists, congressmen, interest groups, and the mass public. “Do you think that you, personally, can help to alleviate some of the uncertainty in the country over Vietnam?” a journalist asked him at a November 1 press conference. “I am doing my best to do that every day,” he replied.

In private conversations with reporters, he described “phenomenal progress in the last two years in building a democratic government in South Vietnam and in the conduct of the war.” He said that “North Vietnam hasn't won a single victory” during this time. “We are making steady progress,” he advised one journalist. Saigon was “in a constitutional process.” Your speech to the international labor group was “great,” a congressman told him in late October. “You put Viet Nam in just the proper perspective.”

But Johnson found it difficult to sustain his rationality in dealing with war critics. During a private conversation with some reporters who pressed him to explain why we were in Vietnam, Johnson lost his patience. According to Arthur Goldberg, “LBJ unzipped his fly, drew out his substantial organ, and declared, ‘This is why!’”¹³⁹

Johnson took special pains to keep Congress behind the war. In a briefing of House members on November 2, he emphasized that the rapport between him and military advisers had never been better. They were in full agreement on all the “basic decisions.” Their policies had assured against a war with Russia or China by convincing them that Ho was not going to win, that the U.S. would not abandon the struggle, that we had no designs on North Vietnam or China, and that we would leave South Vietnam when the violence stopped. The air war was the product of the shared judgments of himself and air commanders, and, where there was some disagreement on targets, hitting them would reduce Communist supply shipments by only 1 percent. Most important, the Communists were now “suffering terribly”: they were losing 1500 men a day to our 15.¹⁴⁰

Two weeks later, he asked Westmoreland to give a congressional briefing. The general couldn't have been more upbeat. “We have got our opponent almost on the ropes,” he declared. “We are confident that we are winning this war. . . . We are grinding this enemy down. And at the same time, we are building up the South Vietnamese to the point where they will be able to progressively take over the greater part of the load.”¹⁴¹